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Beyond Incarcerated Identities:
Identity, Bias and Barriers to Higher Education in Australian Prisons

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ABSTRACT

Incarcerated students face multiple obstacles and constraints while attempting to complete tertiary and pre-tertiary educational programs within Australian prisons. Some of these barriers relate to the individual's attitudes and actions, during and prior to imprisonment, while other barriers may relate to systemic bias and social disadvantages, which the individual cannot control. The classed and racialized realities of Australia's criminal justice system are evident in the dramatically disproportionate rate of imprisonment of Indigenous people, and in Australian state governments' increasingly punitive approach to crime and sentencing which typically captures already excluded and marginalised populations. This prevailing 'criminology of the other,' creates particular tensions for incarcerated students, who are typically attempting to construct positive student identities, as an alternative to being defined as 'other,' 'criminal' or 'deviant.' Using data from a focus group discussion with 12 male incarcerated students inside an Australian prison, this article gives voice to our incarcerated university students, their attempts to construct new horizons for the self through education, and the numerous barriers they encounter along the way.

KEYWORDS

Australian Prisons, Incarcerated Students, Student Identities, Systemic Bias

INTRODUCTION: CRIMINOLOGY OF THE OTHER

Imprisonment does more than immobilise and isolate an 'offender' for a period of time; it also changes a person's life chances and identity choices over a lifetime. On a broader level, the Australian criminal justice system does more than 'correct' criminals; it captures a particular segment of the population, specifically those already most likely to suffer from institutional racism, systemic bias and social injustice. As we shall see, identity and bias are increasingly important issues for prison education, especially when teaching tertiary courses to Australian prisoners. As Wacquant (2009) has observed, prison is not a neutral instrument for law enforcement, but a political institution which reflects power relations by reproducing distinctions between legitimate citizens and dangerous 'others,' or 'insiders' and 'outsiders', 'us' and 'them'. Moreover, punitive approaches, which effectively cut incarcerated students off from the outside world and internet access, compound social and economic disadvantages which extend long after the term of imprisonment.

The incarcerated student, who seeks to complete higher education courses inside an Australian prison, is confronted firstly with the testing fact of his or her own imprisonment and must develop

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ways to cope with the multiple constraints this fact imposes. Under international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Australian prisoners have the same rights to education as free citizens. In reality, however, the practice architectures of prison management frequently prioritise security, work, and economic efficiency to the detriment of educational opportunity.

While contemporary prisons aim, in theory at least, to rehabilitate rather than punish, the overriding focus on security, on protecting victims, and on public safety, means that most incarcerated students are disconnected from online learning, unable to email their lecturers, or participate in online social forums. The shift to paperless, digital or online-only delivery of university courses means disconnected and incarcerated students are at risk of further marginalisation and isolation. As a result, incarcerated students are in danger of falling through the digital gap between those who benefit from new technologies of learning, communication and networking, and those who are left behind. Moreover, the systematic lack of direct access to the internet for educational purposes, experienced by incarcerated students and maintained by Australian corrections policy and practice, would be considered discriminatory or unjust treatment, if so consistently applied to other student populations. The denial of internet access, which undermines educational and employment opportunities, compounds social and economic marginalisation for the prisoner or former prisoner. Hence, internet deprivation becomes another form of exclusion, which the already excluded (the 'other') must bear, in the interests of social stratification.

Moreover, it is important to remember that what happens inside the prison, perhaps even more so than inside other institutions, is defined and delimited by the wider political and social context. In particular, what is happening, or not happening, in prison education will be shaped by a shifting economic climate, a punitive culture, and the rising tide of neoliberalism in Australian society and politics. As Garland (2001, p. 137) explained, over the past two decades, Western governments have increasingly relied upon a 'criminology of the other,' which characterises and produces offenders as the excluded and dangerous 'other,' and which, in turn, produces policies and practices which are increasingly populist and punitive. Rehabilitation comes to be inscribed, not in broad terms of assistive social welfare, but in terms of the most cost-effective and commodified means for managing risks presented by the threatening underclass, especially minority groups, Indigenous and black populations (see Garland, 2001; see also Wacquant, 2005; Wacquant, 2009). Hence, those most adversely affected by the shift to a global post-industrial neoliberal economy (minority groups, Indigenous communities, welfare recipients, the poor), are also the same groups most adversely affected by the shift to the punitive penal state, and its systems of controls and exclusions (see Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2005; & Wacquant, 2009). The real risk is that this socio-political climate may feed into and feed off systemic bias and negative stereotyping; "the offender is rendered more and more abstract, more and more stereotypical…" (Garland, 2001, p. 179). These social, economic and political shifts also have real effects at the level of personal and social identities, as identities are often constructed in terms of binary oppositions: that is, what 'we' are in relation to the outsider or 'other.' With racist stereotypes, for example, those who are defined as outsider and 'other' may be subject to hatred, exclusion and marginalisation (see Hall, 1997; see Said, 1978). Instead of recognising the humanity of the offender and the collective, social responsibilities of the state, this criminology of the other tends to demonize the individual 'criminal' as an outsider or 'other' (see Garland, 2001). As we shall see, the marking of insiders and outsiders, 'us' and 'them,' has particular resonance for the lived realities of prisoners and prison education. From a critical sociological perspective, the negotiation of identity positions always also depends on the negotiation of power relations; and nowhere is the operation of power more evident than in the literal and metaphorical functions of the prison. Certainly, the creation and assertion of identity positions, against a backdrop of marginalisation and exclusion, is a pressing issue for Australian incarcerated students, and those who work with them, in both universities and correctional centres.

As authors, researchers and teachers, our current everyday work with incarcerated university students has uncovered a catalogue of constraints and obstacles these students face while attempting to complete distance education courses inside the prison. We have found that these barriers are not only related to internet access, or the lack of it, but rather the socio-political context in which the learning journey takes place. We believe it is necessary to explore these challenges, which have been identified by the students themselves as important issues to be addressed, in the interests of equity and social justice. Because prisons are historically and inherently about the operation of power, there are many contradictory narratives which surround prison education in the 'enlightened' age of rehabilitation. This paper aims, in particular, to give voice to incarcerated students' perceptions which are typically silenced or disconnected in the digital age. Due to the diminished autonomy inherent to imprisonment, we were especially conscious to respect the perspectives, agency and voices of these participants. Their acute and often intensely personal concerns with fairness and justice meant our participants had much to say relevant to the themes of bias, identity and diversity in education.

SOCIAL RESEARCH IN A PRISON: RESEARCH METHODS AND ISSUES

This article is based on responses from 12 male incarcerated university students obtained in a face-to-face focus group discussion conducted inside an Australian prison during mid-2016. The students who have spoken in this focus group and who provide our data are university students who have accessed course materials from computer terminals running an alternative, offline version of the university 'study desk' or electronic learning management system. Queensland Corrective Services' approval and university ethics clearance were obtained to conduct prison focus groups, wherein participants, who gave informed consent, discussed their various study experiences and the obstacles they had encountered along the way.

Obtaining access to Australian incarcerated university students is not a simple task, however, both in terms of our current research and in terms of our regular prison teaching visits. There are various layers of state government and correctional centre and university ethical approval that must first be obtained and at the regular visits there are background checks, metal detectors, multiple gates, biometric scanners and other security constraints to pass through before the researcher is actually 'inside.' It takes time too, to develop positive working relationships with incarcerated students and education officers once on the inside. We are often reminded that, on multiple levels, prison research is about 'belonging' and 'otherness,' as well as 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and the contested spaces where the two might meet for mutual benefit. Through teaching, visiting and conducting educational research inside Australian correctional centres, we have gathered lessons to share with other educators and researchers – prison learnings which we are currently applying in our own teaching and course development for incarcerated university students. On a purely practical level, the size of the data set and the number of participants was governed by the operational requirements of the prison on the actual day of the visit. As researchers, the timing of the session, the availability of participants and the duration of the conversation are all beyond our control. That does not serve, however, to limit the importance of the data obtained; it is, however, an important reality of the research process.

Although we began our project with questions about the digital disconnection of Australian incarcerated students, once inside the prison and talking with prisoners, it soon became apparent the social phenomena of prison life, and prisoners' personal and social identities, ultimately define and delimit their educational experiences. Our 'social' approach is essentially rooted in critical sociology, with a focus on the person as a social being and a related methodological focus on giving these marginalised individuals a 'voice'. As Smyth and McInerney (2012) suggest, listening to the student voice is particularly important for re-engaging non-traditional students. Our research method enables us to hear the stories of the participants in focus groups, as well as reflect on these identity narratives through the lens of critical sociology. Using our 'sociological imagination' (see Mills, 1959) we unearth a deeper understanding of prison-based education by acknowledging the interdependent relationship

between prisoners' personal experiences and the wider socio-political context. Given the vast majority of these incarcerated students will eventually be released and are expected to re-enter society, their 'personal problems' are very much 'public issues' (see Mills, 1959). Moreover, understanding why a disproportionate number of incarcerated students fail to complete higher education programs is at least in part a sociological and political question, as much as a psychological one. We argue that the success or failure of incarcerated students (and would be incarcerated students) is shaped by social factors, especially the people around them, the environment they are in and the power relations that circulate within that environment. Moreover, their student identity and sense of self takes on new meaning against the roles, rhythms and rituals of the penal institution. As Goffman (1959) suggests, the self is always socially situated, emerging from the moral scripts and interpersonal relations of everyday social life.

INCARCERATED IDENTITIES AND STUDENT IDENTITIES: USING EDUCATIONAL DISCOURSE TO REINVENT THE SELF

In a prison classroom, perhaps more than in any other educational context, identity matters and identity investments will ultimately determine study success or failure. As the ultimate 'total institution' (see Goffman, 1961), the modern prison requires of its inhabitants a working and reworking of personal and social identities. Indeed, the assumption of the modern rehabilitative project is that a reform of the individual from criminal to disciplined and employable citizen is possible and desirable through reflection, work, and education. The problem is, however, that incarceration will affect identity in other unintended ways, for example through the stigma, discrimination and disadvantage that typically follows an inmate even after release. Moreover, at a personal and social level, identities are contested, as incarcerated individuals struggle to define who they are, and who they are not, in relation to others and in relation to public perceptions that permeate the prison walls.

In particular, student identities are the ways incarcerated students often mark out a space of difference and distance from prison identities, a pro-social pathway to resisting how the penal state has defined them thus far. As Pike and Adams (2012) pointed out in their study of distance education learners in UK prisons, prisoners frequently value the identity of 'student' as a 'lifeline.' Incarcerated students work hard to establish and protect this valued identity against competing interpretations of who they are as 'offenders' or 'perpetrators' (see Pike & Adams, 2012). Moreover, reasserting educational discourse, even just by describing themselves and addressing others as 'students' instead of 'offenders' (or worse, 'criminals'), enables our incarcerated students to stay motivated and optimistic, through more positive and inclusive discourses of the self.

Our own focus group research suggests student identities are also contested in Australian prisons, particularly as they mix and merge with race and social class identities. For many Australian incarcerated students, the opportunity to pursue higher education is an opportunity to exercise some agency in their lives – to redefine who they are and to change their future. As we shall see, when interviewing Australian prisoners about higher education, the responses we received were frequently prisoners speaking about who they are, who they wish to be and how others define or delimit them. Moreover, incarcerated students hold to the identity of student as a way to transcend the notorious cycle of prison recidivism, and as a real alternative or 'outside' to the negative peer influences of more criminal subcultures within the prison:

I think studying, I know someone said it before, but it separates you from a lot of the stuff that's going on in the jail (incarcerated university student 2016).
I've tried and used study to separate myself from a lot of it. So I've tried to sort of become as much of a student as possible (incarcerated university student 2016).

I was, yeah, just do another life lag and dirty on the world and everything in it and didn't give a fuck what I was doing you know, but then when me and [another incarcerated student] decided to start studying, well yeah everything changed then (incarcerated university student 2016).
I've never studied before and I wanted to change direction. I thought I would give it a sample, give it a try (incarcerated university student 2016).
I just want to make sure I'm keeping up to date. I never want to come back to jail (incarcerated university student 2016).
I want to focus on having a positive outlook. What can I achieve in the timeframe I'm in here (incarcerated university student 2016).
We understand where we come from; how we got to how we think now as people and individuals (incarcerated university student 2016).

For many inmates, prison is the first place they are presented with access to post-compulsory education and the opportunity for positive identity (re)invention that comes with it. Moreover, by highlighting movement away (or escape) from criminality and the criminal self, these focus group participants take up a transformation narrative, which is potentially more empowering than the identity narratives which have been available to them in the past. For these individuals, who have historically and more typically been defined as 'dangerous', 'threatening' or 'other,' postsecondary education presents a new pathway to social inclusion, successful re-entry and social connections (see also Kim & Clark, 2013; see also RAND Corporation, 2013). As Pike (2014) discovered in her interviews with former inmates from British prisons, successful completion of a university program not only reduces recidivism, it also increases resilience and hope, as 'maintaining a student identity helped them to integrate into society more easily.'

As enabling educators, we have strived to develop specialised learning materials and resources which encourage our incarcerated students to further develop their student identities, reflect on previous experiences and explore their personal and career goals. As we shall see, it is often the vehicle of student identity which moves prisoners into the perception of better selves, better futures and positive pathways beyond prison (see also Pike & Adams, 2012; see also Pike, 2014; see also RAND Corporation, 2013). Australian incarcerated students face daily obstacles, however, in holding on to this potentially transformative student identity in the face of competing interpretations of who they are and what they are capable of – particularly, in the face of systemic bias and socio-cultural disadvantages.

AUSTRALIAN PRISONERS AND SYSTEMIC BIAS

In terms of producing different outcomes for different racial groups, the Australian criminal justice system, while not intended to discriminate, seems to reproduce a systemic bias against the Indigenous population (see Blagg, 2008; see Johnston, 1991; see Weatherburn & Ramsey, 2016). In the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to be charged for offences, less likely to be released on bail and more likely to serve prison sentences than non-Aboriginal offenders, resulting in a 40 percent increase in the imprisonment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people between 2001 and 2015, with a continued upward trend (Weatherburn & Ramsey, 2016). There has been a doubling of the Aboriginal jail population over the past ten years in NSW, due in part to harsher sentencing and expanded police powers which have resulted in more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people jailed for public order offences (Weatherburn & Ramsey, 2016). Similarly, in Western Australia (WA), more than 40 percent of the prison population is Indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014), with one in six Indigenous inmates incarcerated in that state because they could not afford to pay parking penalties and other fine defaults (The Guardian, 2014). The proportion of WA prisoners incarcerated for fine defaults actually tripled from 2008 to 2013 (Pen, 2015, p. 133), suggesting it is minor offenders and fine

defaulters causing prison overcrowding in these states, not dangerous criminals (Papalia, cited in *The Guardian*, 2014).

The new global punitiveness and the growth of the prison-industrial complex in the United States and parts of Europe (see Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2005; & Wacquant, 2009) is also evident in Australia in recent years, where incarceration rates have more than doubled between 1975 and 2015 (Schnepel, 2016). Moreover, the Australian government's increasing preoccupation with 'security' issues and public 'order' has fed into immigration detention centres with foreign 'others' and increased rates of incarceration for the Indigenous and underclass 'others' within. Increases in the number and duration of prison sentences mean the number of prisoners in Australian prisons has recently hit a ten-year high, with 36,134 currently in adult corrective services custody (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). The national imprisonment rate is now 196 prisoners per 100 000 adult population – which is almost three times higher than in Scandinavian countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; International Centre for Prison Studies, 2015). Most disturbing is the national imprisonment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who comprise over one-quarter (9,885 or 27 percent) of the total prisoner population while making up just 2 percent of Australia's population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Indigenous women are now the fastest growing subgroup of Australian prisoners, with the number incarcerated nearly doubling over the past decade (Rubinsztein-Dunlop, 2014). As we shall see, the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in Australian prisons reflect a shameful historical legacy of racism, discrimination and injustice against already vulnerable populations.

As Goulding (2007, p. 29) has pointed out: 'Prison populations are often indicative of prevailing patterns of social injustice and discrimination.' Class bias in the Australian criminal justice system is reflected in that fact that the vast majority of prisoners in Australia share a background of socio-economic disadvantage, including unemployment, low educational attainment, family violence and poverty (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015; Bedford, 2007; White & Perrone, 1997; White & Graham, 2010; Vinson, 2004; Vinson, 2007; see also Reiman & Leighton 2010). The Victorian Ombudsman reports that 'half of Victoria's prisoners come from 6 percent of postcodes' representing the lowest socio-economic status suburbs (Cowie, 2015). Compounding socioeconomic disadvantage, racial bias and indirect institutional racism means Australia also has one of the highest Indigenous or first people incarceration rates in the world (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). As we shall see, Indigenous prisoners may also bear the legacy of the 'Stolen Generations,' those people forcibly institutionalised and systematically removed from their parents and country (see also Goulding, 2007). In Australia, social groups that suffer most from racism and discrimination, such as Indigenous Australians, are imprisoned in disproportionate numbers, just as in the United States, African Americans are most affected by punitive policies and American penal culture (Goulding, 2007). Indeed Australia, like the United States, seems to have embraced a new punitiveness as a way to manage illegal immigrants, people of colour, the surplus underclass and other 'outsiders' in the neoliberal state and post-Fordist economy (see De Giorgi, 2006; see Wacquant, 2005; see Wacquant, 2009). This detention, containment and punishment system has manifestly unjust effects for vulnerable populations. Discussion with prisoners reveals they are often acutely aware that the Australian criminal justice system punishes in disproportionate, unjust and racially biased ways, particularly in the light of mandatory sentencing and tough on crime policies. As such punitive policies have led to overcrowding in Australian prisons in recent years (see also Rubinsztein-Dunlop, 2014), incarcerated students are further disadvantaged by the lack of adequate space and time to study.

Although all Australian prisons support education in principle, in practice incarcerated students face multiple obstacles studying in that environment. Similarly, few Australian universities and distance education providers are adequately prepared for supporting incarcerated students through these challenges. While all Australian universities aim to promote diversity and equity, in reality, their materials, procedures and practices frequently disadvantage incarcerated students who, in the

main, are unable to access the internet, even for educational purposes. Providing a truly inclusive learning environment for distance learners inside Australian prisons is a challenge few Australian universities are able to meet effectively.

Even if they do manage to complete their educational programs, former inmates with a criminal record face widespread discrimination in the employment market and vilification in the outside world (Evans, 2007). As Evans (2007) has put it, even when prisoners are no longer 'locked up' they are still 'locked out' of full social and economic participation, by discrimination and bias against inmates and former inmates at a personal and social level. While both universities and prisons claim to help all students achieve their full potential, in reality the support incarcerated students receive is rarely equal to that provided to other university students, and is compounded by wider class-based and racial inequalities. Although overt racial discrimination is illegal in Australia, institutional racism and covert discrimination leaves low socioeconomic status groups, prisoners and indigenous Australians vulnerable to funding cutbacks and entrenched inequalities in access to health and education services.

Our focus group data suggests incarcerated students often feel discriminated against, unsupported or marginalised in their attempts to obtain a post-secondary degree, in feelings directed to both the prison and the education provider. These feelings are despite good intentions and university-led initiatives. Moreover, these feelings of anger and frustration that arise from perceptions of unfair treatment and unequal access to education staff, educational technologies and educational opportunities, can lead to incarcerated students dropping out or falling back into negative coping strategies. Some students feel the prison, and some corrections officers, are hostile or indifferent to their attempts to undertake and complete higher education, making staying motivated particularly challenging. Prisoners are also routinely subject to assumptions which would be considered discriminatory if applied to other student populations – the assumption that prisoners need only basic skills development and vocational training, not higher education, for example. Such prejudicial assumptions, which reflect the populist, erroneous stereotype that criminals are of lesser intelligence, also reduce motivation, aspiration and confidence in incarcerated university students, or would-be students. Some incarcerated students feel compulsory behaviour management courses, and vocational training in industries are not stimulating, challenging or thought-provoking in the way higher education can be. Even in purely economistic and reductionist terms, the focus on vocational training may be misguided, as most new jobs created in the future 'information society' will require post-secondary and digitally literate education. Hence, without intervention and reform, it is likely the social and digital isolation of Australian incarcerated students will compound their class-based lack of economic, social, political and cultural 'capital' into the future (see Bourdieu, 1985).

Our research suggests incarcerated university students in Australia continue to face a kind of indirect discrimination in their daily lived realities, despite various institutional equity policies, rehabilitation rhetoric and rights to education enshrined in international law. Incarcerated students have stated they want and value fair and comparable access to higher education, although this access is under threat from the lack of adequate resources, the sacking of tertiary-educated education officers in some correctional centres, the prioritising of vocational training and basic skills development over university courses, the lack of reliable access to digital communication technologies for educational purposes and, overall, funding cutbacks to welfare programs that support vulnerable groups and provide alternatives to imprisonment pathways. In recent years, mandatory sentencing and tough on crime policies pursued by state and federal Australian governments have also led to significant overcrowding in Australian prisons and have put more pressures on incarcerated students who need time and quiet spaces to study. The everyday consequences for individual incarcerated students of this socio-political context and widespread neoliberal policy shifts will be discussed in more detail below.

PRISONER VOICES

The responses in our focus groups suggest Indigenous incarcerated students, in particular, may have spent much of their youth in institutional care and have experienced abuse, racism and discrimination. As the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (see Johnston, 1991) argued nearly two decades ago, members of Australia's 'Stolen Generations' face particular challenges to their sense of self, personal and cultural identity. As one of our Indigenous incarcerated students told his story:

See I was part of the Stolen Generations, as you know. I was taken from my family at six years old you know and I've spent three months out of jail since then. They had to let me go from the boys' home because I turned into an adult. I wasn't under state order then, but I've never been out, to miss things outside. I've never been fishing or camping or what normal people do out there (Indigenous incarcerated university student 2016).
We're victims too and we should realise that but - and how we can be better - because everyone can be to a degree; it's just that there are other ways to go around things. Because their answer in the home back then was bashing and kick your guts in, you know. We thought that was the natural thing to do. That's how we were brought up. Unfortunately, [I] took two people's lives to realise that's not the way you should do it (male incarcerated university student 2016).

Recounting his negative childhood experiences, this participant reveals the history of deprivation, violence, victimhood and institutional racism which has led into criminalisation and incarceration. His account also reveals, however, an optimistic determination to exercise individual agency (and make better choices), despite the history of intersecting structural constraints and social disadvantages which he did not choose. His account suggests he is negotiating an identity position and cultivating a critical awareness that was not available to him in the past, partly through engagement with higher education (and through anthropology and Aboriginal studies in particular).

Our participants were critically conscious of their location on the losing end of stigmatizing, punitive narratives about undeserving 'criminals' who are a burden on the (penal) state. Certainly, as Wacquant (2009) has observed, the criminalizing gaze is now the dominant way the neoliberal, punitive state sees marginalised and vulnerable populations. Moreover, in a social and economic context of increased competition for fewer jobs and public resources, sharp lines are drawn in both populist rhetoric and political discourse between legitimate citizens and unworthy 'others' (see Wacquant, 2009; see Garland, 2001). As aware 'knowing' subjects, and critical thinkers, our incarcerated students reflect on how they are being 'read' by such discourses:

Periodically, you'll see newspaper articles, these inmates are studying, it's 'what the hell, they should be breaking bricks not taking places from our darling kids' (incarcerated university student 2016).

The incarcerated students were also critically aware of populist, media stereotypes of criminals, and how such misleading (mis)representations may influence public opinion against prisoners – even those prisoners seeking to improve themselves through education. They appear critically conscious of how sensationalist crime dramas and news reporting feeds into the growing 'moral panic' about dangerous 'others', which in turn produces an increasingly punitive society:

I think society just thinks criminals are all the worst that you see on TV. So I think whatever the worst criminal you've seen on TV, I think that's what most people think we all are (incarcerated university student 2016).

These students seemed particularly aware that current debates around prison education essentially produce meanings about identities, about the sort of people who commit crime and whether or not they are correctable. Moreover, as the public debates around crime become more hostile, heated and punitive ('tough on crime'), these discourses tend to be more divisive than inclusive. The perception, or reality, of bias against prisoners, makes some incarcerated students reluctant to reveal their current or former incarcerated status, even in the relatively enlightened realm of higher education. The incarcerated students are well aware of the barely suppressed climate of hostility and prejudice they may face, not just from the public and potential employers, but from teachers and other students:

In discussions, you know how you introduce yourself at the start [of the course], I never, ever, ever would say I'm an inmate, just because it only takes one to take offence to that and go to the media or anything. So I do not talk about it [prisoner status] whatsoever (incarcerated university student 2016).

On a positive note, while incarcerated students may be acutely aware of the bias and barriers they may face in the community and in the labour market, they typically see education as a way to overcome or at least offset some of these barriers. Educational qualifications, in particular, seem to provide legitimated recourse to alternative subjectivities:

I speak to some people, one's a professor who has been to prison and he said, his advice was the more qualifications you can get, the less barriers you're up against in society. So I'm just motivated by that. I'm just going to keep trying to get higher and higher (incarcerated university student 2016).

BIAS OR BARRIERS: STUDYING WHILE INCARCERATED

When asked about their experiences of studying university courses while incarcerated, most participants highlight the negative experiences of completing distance education courses in a relatively closed (and sometimes hostile) environment. While the majority of incarcerated students do express gratitude for the educational opportunities provided to them, the experience of studying while incarcerated is dominated by common restrictions and constraints specific to the conditions inside a penal institution. While increased surveillance and security and decreased mobility and liberty are, of course, an inherent part of life in Australian prisons, the long term deprivations and hardships imposed by limited or no access to the internet and higher education is not widely acknowledged or understood.

In our so-called connected, digital, 'information society' or 'network society' (see Castells, 2004; Castells, 1996), there is one minority group that remains almost entirely disconnected and outside the digital network – prisoners. The vast majority of Australian prisoners have no direct access to internet-enabled computers, despite the fact that this digital disconnection puts them at a serious disadvantage when attempting to complete distance education courses in the age of the digital university. Our focus group participants spell out the many problems of prison education in the digital age:

Having access to different stuff. Just handing in assignments. Getting material on time. Because it's gone digital, some lecturers will send it and some won't. The education officer can download stuff and put it on my laptop. I have trouble reading twenty different things on a laptop. Paper copies don't arrive even when they say they are going to send them. I don't know what's there either. There are probably services that I'm entitled to. Books don't come for three or four weeks. When you're doing four subjects, things keep piling up. It would be good if we could speak to [the university] support directly (incarcerated university student 2016).
Most of our time is spent waiting for EOs [Education Officers] to download course materials. The other problem is journal articles. We don't have time to read abstracts. A searchable database for

journal articles would be good. You can't just download articles, you have to wait a few days or the EO to be able to sit with you and download stuff (incarcerated university student 2016).

Aside from lack of reliable access to technologies and staff, Australian incarcerated students also complain about their study conditions, in particular, a lack of privacy and quiet space to study:

Prison is an environment where it is especially difficult to remain focused…being noisy, regimented… lack of a supportive peer group...a greater emphasis is placed on employment, than on education (incarcerated university student 2016).
It's noisy… Everything echoes. I set up all my stuff on the dining room table. The moment I'm finished, I have to pack everything up so it doesn't get touched (incarcerated university student 2016).
It's not a nice place. It's an unnatural environment. People aren't designed to live in this environment and it's highly stressful for everybody (incarcerated university student 2016).

Some incarcerated students suggest that, if rehabilitation and re-entry to society is to be more than rhetoric, the environment should be more 'normal' in terms of enabling students more agency and autonomy in their own time management and living arrangements. Some incarcerated students also suggest that the prison should avoid indirectly discriminating against university students when prioritising industry work or vocational training in scheduling. They also suggest it is important to avoid making stereotypical assumptions about the level of educational activities which should be offered and prioritised within the prison:

Education has the least priority. Security is more important (incarcerated university student 2016).
There is no real stimulant to change in here. I think any change is started voluntarily (incarcerated university student 2016).
Industries is what they want. They'd rather you go in and out; yeah come back, work for $3 a day, they make what they make, than you sitting up here bettering yourself and not coming back (incarcerated university student 2016).

Although these direct accounts from Australian prisoners are confronting, they are certainly in keeping with critiques of the new punitiveness in other Western countries. As Pike (2014) observed from the United Kingdom: 'Despite the fact that research shows that inmates who study higher-level courses in prison and continue to study on release integrate better into society and are less likely to return to prison, these courses have a very low priority in prison and lack adequate funding or support.'

Social interactions and social networks are important for coping with tertiary study, however, they too are problematic for incarcerated students. As Karimshah and colleagues (2013) have suggested, social factors are particularly important for the retention of low socio-economic status university students facing significant adversity. For incarcerated students, such disadvantages related to race and class positioning are frequently exacerbated further by the environment itself, which by its very nature is isolationist and prevents freedom of association. Even upon release, former prisoners are often lacking in cultural and social 'capital' (see Bourdieu, 1985), with fewer opportunities to build mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships and social networks in the 'straight' world:

Soon as a crim, a lifer or a long termer gets out, they put them - they stipulate in their parole that they can't have association. So you can't ring that person or talk to that person or write a letter to them because he's an ex-crim (incarcerated university student 2016).

Incarcerated students also complain about financial constraints to further study – a common problem for low socio-economic background students which is exacerbated by the constraints of

the prison environment. It is important to keep in mind that phone calls, supplementary food items, hygiene products and textbooks must often be purchased from the limited funds prisoners earn while within the institution. Moreover, most do not have family members with the motivation and means to pay for expensive textbooks for tertiary courses. Many incarcerated students are also dealing with emotional difficulties and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety which in turn affects their ability to use their time productively, plan for the future, and remain optimistic about a future on the outside (see also Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012). Many focus group participants seem to feel that while higher education is tolerated within the prison, it is not adequately supported, especially for those with pre-existing difficulties and disadvantages.

NEW HORIZONS OF THE SELF: WHAT EDUCATION MEANS BEHIND BARS

Despite the numerous constraints they face, incarcerated students express awareness of the potential of higher education to change their lives for the better. They value higher education, not just as a credential to improve their employability, but as an opportunity to live a more meaningful and fulfilling life. Studying while incarcerated also helped our students to cope with the psychological injuries and pains of imprisonment, by giving them back a sense of direction, agency and control over their future:

If somebody had walked up to me four, five years ago and said you're going to be doing uni I'd just smack them in the mouth and say wake up to yourself. Now I'm three and a half years into it you know (incarcerated university student 2016).
It's [education] changed my whole life. I've been in jail nearly 40 years - since 1978. I never went to school or anything. Only started studying in 2012. The things you learn every day it intrigues me, you know, inspired me to keep going every day because well I was a part of the Stolen Generations and to learn so much about our culture - because I'm doing anthropology and Aboriginal studies and Australian studies - but I wanted to do anthropology because it learns about everybody else's culture as well (incarcerated university student 2016).
I wish I would have done it [higher education] 30 years ago; I wouldn't have done 40 years. (incarcerated university student 2016).
… even if you don't use it [higher education] for anything to go on in a career, it just gives you a wider perspective and then you can communicate outside of your box; there are other things to talk about and you can talk to people on different levels. Wider understanding of our culture and society and how it works and how we're supposed to operate within it (incarcerated university student 2016).
I've got heaps more self-confidence; like because I never went to school now I can - I'm still a slow reader, but I'm picking up you know, but yeah it's changed my whole quality of life too. Before I used to just get around looking for drugs and violence and now I study 24/7 so that keeps my mind off the other bullshit; you know what I mean (incarcerated university student 2016)?

ON THE OUTSIDE: TRANSITION PEDAGOGY FOR INCARCERATED STUDENTS

Our incarcerated students have demonstrated optimism, resilience and readiness to change – however, they cannot do it all alone. They need intensive and integrated support throughout their distance education courses and beyond, as they re-enter society and the employment market as graduates. Further research needs to be done on how to balance public security and anxieties about convicted criminals against the need to provide fair and comparable access to education for the most marginalised and isolated of student populations. Although much excellent work has been done in the emerging field of enabling education on transition pedagogy, especially regarding first year university students, (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Chester et al., 2013), relatively little has been written about the unique challenges incarcerated university students face when they are released and must transition to study

on the outside. In Australia, these prisoners must transition from little or no access to communication technologies to a world where almost all higher education (and indeed much professional, personal and financial activity) is done online – a transition problem which may explain in part why so many incarcerated students fail to complete, even after being released. Students who have adapted to prison adversity and do cope successfully with prison-based education, may have to learn completely new study management skills all over again, as they transition to a new study environment outside the prison gates. Some may feel overwhelmed with the pressure of maintaining a study load while also looking for work, rebuilding relationships with family and friends and fitting into a society that has moved on without them. To ensure former inmates continue their distance education courses upon release, students need not just access to higher education but adequate, holistic and ongoing support to transition to self-directed online learning on the outside. They also deserve recognition for their hard-won achievements in education against a background of significant adversity and disconnection – recognition which may in turn change prevailing social attitudes about the value of prison education. The mainstream press and public may also need to be educated to see higher education for prisoners not as an expensive or unfair luxury, but as key to unlocking better futures and new selves for prisoners and former prisoners.

CONCLUSION: INCLUSION, ACCESS AND SUPPORT

It is important to recognise the hope, self-determination and agency of our incarcerated participants who are currently working hard to overcome multiple disadvantages. As one of our Indigenous incarcerated participants commented: "Rather than being influenced by society, we can influence it!" It is equally important, however, for educational researchers and practitioners to recognise the structural constraints, and the institutional discrimination that prevents many disadvantaged incarcerated students from achieving their full potential. Our research participants have been imprisoned for crimes, in some cases, violent crimes. It is important to remember, however, that in some sense they are also victims – victims of the historical legacy of racism, abusive relationships, institutional discrimination and systemic bias. Technology alone cannot solve these complex issues, in part because their personal problems often have social and political causes. Hence, to prevent further exclusion of incarcerated students as dangerous 'others', it is imperative to focus on the humanity of offenders and the social context of their offending. Incarcerated students are also, in the main, low socio-economic status students and Indigenous students and it is important to understand their learning and life experiences in the context of socio-cultural disadvantages and class and race based systemic bias.

One of the key findings of our research is that the barriers to successful completion which incarcerated students face are not just academic or technological. The learning environment of the prison also hinders student take-up, progression and completion, in part by eroding student motivation and confidence. While it is important to provide incarcerated students with fair and comparable access to higher education materials and courses, it is equally important to provide them with the interpersonal support from the qualified teachers, empathetic lecturers and learning communities they need to complete the courses they start. As Engstrom and Tinto (2008) have pointed out, 'access without support is not opportunity.' The first step to providing such support is to understand the unique learning environment incarcerated students are working within and the complex challenges they face. It is hoped this article has made a contribution to developing such understanding, by highlighting the 'voices' of the students themselves. It is hoped we have made a contribution to moving away from the prevailing punitiveness of a 'criminology of the other,' to recover instead the core values of egalitarianism, fairness and social inclusion through our learning and teaching.

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